NAXOS

DDD

8.550508

CHOPIN

Ballades

Berceuse, Op. 57 • Fantasie, Op. 49

Idil Biret

Fryderyk Chopin (1810 - 1849)

Fryderyk Chopin was born near Warsaw in 1810, the son of Nicolas Chopin, a Frenchman who had been drawn by chance to Poland, through the assistance and kindness of a Polish estate administrator in France, who, on his return home, had taken the boy with him and given him employment as a clerk. Nicolas Chopin was to become a respected figure in Warsaw as a teacher of French, after serving as a tutor in various families and marrying a poor relation of one of his employers, Count Skarbek.

Chopin himself was educated in Warsaw. His musical abilities were given every encouragement and he took private lessons from Jozef Elsner, director of the Conservatory, before finally becoming a student there. He had begun to make a name for himself locally, but Warsaw offered relatively limited opportunities, and in 1830 he set out for Vienna, a city where he had already aroused some interest during an earlier visit.

As matters turned out, Chopin was to receive relatively little attention in Vienna now that his intentions were more serious, and the following year, on the pretext of travelling to London, he obtained a passport for Paris. It was there that he was to spend the greater part of his career, recapturing the spirit of his native Poland, its armies now defeated by Russia, in a musical language that was entirely his own.

In Paris Chopin had immediate connection with Polish refugees. At the same time he established himself as a popular teacher of the piano for the more distinguished families of the capital, and as a performer in the fashionable salons of the leading hostesses of the day. His style of playing, with its delicate variety of nuance, its idiomatic pedalling and rhythmic freedom, was not of a kind to offer serious competition to the showmen of the keyboard, to Liszt, Thalberg or Kalkbrenner.

At first Chopin regarded Liszt and his Bohemian circle with some reserve, but it was through Liszt that he was to meet the novelist George Sand

(Baroness Dudevant), a woman who was his mistress for some ten years, before estrangement as her children grew older and tempers wore thinner. His health had for long been seriously endangered by tubercular infection, exacerbated during the famous winter he spent in Mallorca with George Sand in 1837. The revolution of 1848 and an interruption to normal sources of income brought temporary exile with recitals in England and Scotland. He returned to Paris towards the end of the year and died there on 17th October, 1849.

Chopin was largely responsible for the creation of the Ballade for piano. The word itself describes a kind of poetic composition that had found particular favour in Germany at the close of the eighteenth century, with the verses of Goethe and Schiller appearing in the famous Balladenjahr of 1797. Thereafter the Ballade continued to hold the romantic imagination as a re-creation of the primitive narrative verse of an earlier age, particular that of the Scottish borders.

The four Ballades of Chopin are said to have been inspired by the verses of the Poet Adam Mickiewicz, an exile in Paris and a friend of the composer. The source of the first Ballade, it has been suggested, was the poem Konrad Wallenrod, a medieval story of patriotic vengeance wrought through treason, and a thinly disguised attack on the Russian domination of Poland. Here the characteristic lilt of the music is preceded by a dramatic introductory passage, a call to the listener's attention. After this the tale unfolds, a story of increasing intensity, with moments of serenity, moments of passion, and what seems to be the recurrent voice of the narrator, captured in the first, principal theme.

The first Ballade was completed in 1835 and published the following year with a dedication to the Hanoverian ambassador in Paris, Baron Stockhausen. The second Ballade was published in 1840 with a dedication to Robert Schumann, who found it inferior to the first, "less artistic, but equally fantastic and intellectual", but suggesting that the more intense episodes had been inserted as an afterthought. The literary source may have been Mickiewicz's account of the Lake of the Wilis, a legend evoked in Adam's ballet Giselle. Here the narrative begins at once, in the simplest form, to be interrupted by a sudden, feverish burst of activity. The voice of the story-teller is heard again, mounting

in excitement and interrupted once more by a passage of fierce intensity, on which there is the briefest melancholy comment in conclusion.

The third Ballade, published in November, 1841, with a dedication to the composer's pupil, Princess Pauline de Noailles, is said to draw on Mickiewicz's poem Undine, the story of the water-spirit, subject of Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's fairy-tale and of operas by E.T.A. Hoffmann and Lortzing, as well as the inspiration of the first episode in Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit. Undine loves a mortal, who would be unable to survive her aquatic embraces. The moderate voice of the narrator opens the Ballade, a tale of love, set against the gentle rocking of the waves, an intervening episode leading to a recapitulation of greater passion and intensity.

The last of the Ballades was published in 1843 and dedicated to Baronne Nathalie de Rothschild. In F minor, the Ballade opens with some harmonic ambiguity, gently introducing the narrative and going on to moments of greater intensity and a gently lilting chordal passage, before the increased elaboration and passion of the conclusion. Those who have sought literary inspiration for the Ballades have had less to say on the matter with this work, with its contrasting episodes of naïve simplicity and filigree complication, although there are many who regard it as the summit of Chopin's achievement.

It was Chopin who elevated the cradle-song into a higher art form in his D flat major Berceuse, in which he establishes the rhythm and mood to be followed by later composers, including Liszt, who took Chopin's Berceuse as his model. The work was completed in 1844 and published a year later, with a dedication to Elise Gavard, one of those female pupils and admirers who joined in later general attempts to console him after his breach with George Sand in 1847. The Berceuse was principally the work of an otherwise largely unproductive summer at Nohant in 1843, its inspiration perhaps the small daughter of the singer Pauline Viardot, left with George Sand for the summer, while her mother was on tour. It is music of charm and elegant simplicity.

The three Nouvelles études were written in 1839 for the Méthode des méthodes published by the piano virtuoso Ignaz Moscheles and the Belgian

musicologist François-Joseph Fétis in Berlin 1840, studies commissioned in spite of the reservations Moscheles held about Chopin's style. The first two are studies in cross-rhythms and the third a combination of legato and staccato.

The Fantaisie, Opus 49, opening in F minor and modulating to a final A flat major, was written in 1841 and dedicated to Princess Cathérine de Souzzo, a pupil whom Chopin continued to teach until the end of his life. The work was committed to paper during the first weeks of the composer's stay that year at George Sand's country estate of Nohant, an uneasy time, and sent for copying to Chopin's friend Fontana in Paris. The Fantaisie opens with a solemn march, through which shine shafts of sunlight, although it is of interest to recall the story that associated the work with yet another quarrel with George Sand, who first knocks at the door, then is bidden enter, before the ensuing passionate conversation. The opening march is linked by a series of modulating arpeggios to a more excited passage, which gives way to a more rational chordal intervention. At the heart of the Fantaisie, which is in broadly classical sonata form, is a B major section, marked Lento sostenuto. The work parts with classical tradition primarily in its A flat major conclusion.

The Galop Marquis, E flat Largo, Funeral March and Cantabile are less well known. The Funeral March, Opus 72, No. 2, published posthumously, in the key of C minor, with an A flat major Trio section, was written in 1827, a forerunner of the more famous Funeral March that later formed part of the B flat minor Piano Sonata. The short Cantabile was composed in Paris in 1834 and the solemn Largo three years later. The energetic Galop became a fashionable dance in Paris from 1829, making its appearance initially as an adjunct to the quadrille.

Idil Biret

Born in Ankara, Idil Biret began piano lessons at the age of three. She displayed an outstanding gift for music and graduated from the Paris Conservatoire with three first prizes when she was fifteen. She studied piano with Alfred Cortot and Wilhelm Kempff, and composition with Nadia Boulanger. Since the age of sixteen Idil Biret has performed in concerts around the world playing with major orchestras under the direction of conductors such as Monteux, Boult, Kempe, Sargent, de Burgos, Pritchard, Groves and Mackerras. She has participated in the festivals of Montreal, Persepolis, Royan, La Rochelle, Athens, Berlin, Gstaad and Istanbul. She was also invited to perform at the 85th birthday celebration of Wilhelm Backhaus and at the 90th birthday celebration of Wilhelm Kempff. Idil Biret received the Lily Boulanger Memorial Fund award (1954/1964), the Harriet Cohen/Dinu Lipatti Gold Medal (1959) and the Polish Artistic Merit Award (1974) and was named Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite in 1976.

Interpreting Chopin

Although the romantic era in its music and its performances is not so far from our own time, for various reasons we seem to have distanced ourselves from it. As a consequence, often composers very different from one another like Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Wagner are brought under the same title of Romantic Composers. In this context it is quite normal to find Chopin and Liszt mentioned together as composers of similar style, while there are no two sound worlds as different from one another as those of Chopin and Liszt. The conception of the piano sound that Chopin created is based on the model of the voice. Liszt, on the other hand, fascinated by the development of the modern piano during his period, challenges the orchestra in an attempt to reproduce on the piano the richness of the orchestral palette.

It must be among the fondest wishes of any pianist to be able to have heard Chopin perform his own music. Fortunately there are some recordings providing indirectly some evidence of this way of approaching the piano. One may in particular mention the recordings of Raoul von Koczalski who studied with Chopin's pupil Karol Mikuli. It is also enlightening to listen to the recordings of Cortot, a pupil of Decombes who received precious counsel from Chopin. Further, Friedman de Pachmann and Paderewski who were not direct descendants of Chopin were still close enough to his aesthetic conceptions to be able to convey the spontaneity Chopin is said to have brought to his playing as well as the polyphonic and rhythmic richness which are so apparent in Chopin's conception of the piano. In spite of the inferior quality of the recordings from the earlier part of this century, a considerable number of common points are audible in the performances of these pianists. Notably, a very fine legato, a piano sound that never loses its roundness since intensity replaces force, the exact feeling of rubato, recognition of the importance of inner voices and consequently a remarkable sense of polyphony. Contrary to the popular image of the romantic virtuoso, simplicity and naturalness remain exemplary in the way these great Chopin interpreters approach music.

It is interesting to note also the evidence left by musicians, contemporaries of Chopin, and Chopin's pupils about his interpretations. A perfect legato drawing its inspiration from bel canto and unimaginable richness in tone-colour were the product of subtle variations in a sound full of charm and a purity that lost none of its fullness even in its forte passages. Chopin could not sound aggressive, especially on the pianos of that period. Berlioz wrote, "To be able to appreciate Chopin fully, I think one must hear him from close by, in the salon rather than in a theatre."

Chopin's sense of rubato was unrivalled. The temps dérobé (stolen time) assumed under the hands of the great master its true meaning. Mikuli gives a description of the rubato as Chopin conceived it, which seems to be of penetrating clarity. After recalling that Chopin was inflexible in keeping the tempo and that the metronome was always on his piano, Mikuli explains, "Even in his rubato, where one hand - the accompanying one - continues to play strictly in time, the other - the hand which sings the melody - freed from all metric restraint conveys the true musical expression, impatience, like someone whose speech becomes fiery with enthusiasm."

Together with a certain classicism, moderation was the basis of the world of Chopin. Hence, playing his music on the powerful modern pianos and in large concert halls is often problematic. One should ideally never go beyond a limit of sound and keep in mind as the criteria the possibilities of the human voice. It is therefore better to somewhat reduce sonority without sacrificing the quality of the sound.

In performing Chopin's works one should neither try to reconstruct nor imitate the interpretations of the past which remain unique, but try, with the help of all the recorded and written material we are lucky to possess, to penetrate deeper into the musical texts and advance further in the unending quest for a better understanding of the art of Chopin.

Idil Biret

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STEREO

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CHOPIN

Ballades • Berceuse, Op. 57
Fantasie, Op. 49

Idil Biret

Playing Time: 72'50"

1	Ballade I, Op. 23	(9:55)
2	Ballade II, Op. 38	(7:35)
3	Ballade III, Op. 47	(7:38)
4	Ballade IV, Op. 52	(12:10)
5	Berceuse, Op. 57	(4:37)
	3 Nouvelles Etudes	
6	No. 1	(2:02)
7	No. 2	(2:31)
8	No. 3	(1:58)
9	Fantasie, Op. 49	(13:28)
10	Gallop Marquis	(0:56)
11	Largo	(2:21)
12	Marche Funebre	(5:28)
13	Cantabile	(1:08)

Recorded at the Clara Wieck Auditorium, Heidelberg,
in March, April, September, 1991 and February, 1992.
Producer: Martin Sauer
Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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